

Message Text

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PAGE 01 LONDON 08089 01 OF 02 161932Z
ACTION EUR-12

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L-03 NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 PRS-01 SP-02 SS-15
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LIMITED OFFICIAL USE SECTION 01 OF 02 LONDON 08089

E.O. 11652: N/A
TAGS: PGOV, PINT, UK
SUBJECT: SCOTTISH TORY CONFERENCE: DEVOLUTION
COMMITMENT WEAKENED

REF: 76 LONDON 7648

SUMMARY: HIGHLIGHT OF SCOTTISH TORY CONFERENCE IN PERTH
MAY 11-14 WAS PERCEPTIBLE MOVE AWAY FROM PARTY'S
PREVIOUS COMMITMENT TO DEVOLUTION. EMBOLDENED BY RECENT
TORY SUCCESSES IN LOCAL AND DISTRICT ELECTIONS IN
SCOTLAND, WHERE TORIES DID BETTER THAN EXPECTED AND SNP
NOT AS WELL, CONFERENCE VOTED FOR TEPID MOTION CALLING
FOR INTER-PARTY DISCUSSIONS ON DEVOLUTION AND CONDEMNING
AGAIN GOVERNMENT'S DEVOLUTION BILL. TORY POLICY, VOICED
BY PARTY SPOKESMAN ON DEVOLUTION PYM AND BY LEADER OF
THE PARTY THATCHER, CAREFULLY AVOIDED REFERENCE TO
"ELECTED ASSEMBLY" WHICH HAD BEEN PREVIOUS LINE, EMPHA-
SIZED CONSTITUTIONAL DIFFICULTIES, AND CONCENTRATED ON
HANGING SEPARATIST LABEL ON SNP. IN LINE WITH EMPHASIS
SCOTTISH TORIES ARE PLACING ON "UNIONISM" IN POLICIES,
SCOTS ALSO APPEAR TO BE ERASING SOME OF TRADITIONAL
INDEPENDENCE FROM CENTRAL HEADQUARTERS OF THE ENGLISH
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PAGE 02 LONDON 08089 01 OF 02 161932Z

PARTY. END SUMMARY.

1. SCOTTISH TORY CONFERENCE IN PERTH MAY 11-14 WAS HIGH-
LIGHTED BY TURN AWAY FROM PARTY'S COMMITMENT TO DEVOLU-
TION. WHILE DOOR HAS NOT BEEN COMPLETELY CLOSED, THE
PARTY APPEARS CONVINCED THAT DEVOLUTION FOR MANY SCOTS
MEANS EVENTUAL SEPARATION AND THAT THE PARTY STANDS TO

GAIN MORE VOTES THROUGH STRESSING UNIONISM AND A FRONTAL ATTACK ON THE SNP THAN FROM BLANKET ENDORSEMENT OF DEVOLUTION PER SE.

2. RECENT FAVORABLE RESULTS FOR THE SCOTTISH TORIES IN LOCAL AND DISTRICT ELECTIONS ARE PERCEIVED PROOF. THE SCOT TORIES WERE JUBILANT ABOUT THEIR SUCCESSES AFTER THE MEDIA HAD FORECAST A LACKLUSTRE TORY PERFORMANCE AND GLOWING RESULTS FOR THE SNP. MOST TORIES IN SCOTLAND DO NOT, HOWEVER, SEE THE IMMINENT DEMISE OF THE SNP; THEY EXPECT THE SNP TO MAKE GAINS FROM LABOR IN THE NEXT GENERAL ELECTION, THE TORIES PERHAPS TO WIN BACK A FEW SEATS AS WELL AS LOSE SOME, AND THE LIBERALS ON THE WAY TO EXTINCTION. THE ELECTORAL WEAPON THE TORIES WILL CONTINUE TO USE WITH THE ELECTORATE AGAINST THE SNP IS THAT A VOTE FOR THE SNP IS A VOTE FOR SEPARATION AND FOR FURTHER SOCIALISM.

3. AN ADDITIONAL FACTOR IN EXPLAINING WHY THE SCOT TORIES ARE BUSILY BACKING AWAY FROM DEVOLUTION IS THE AWARENESS OF THE STRONG OPPOSITION TO DEVOLUTION IN THEIR SISTER ENGLISH TORY PARTY. THE PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES ON THE DEVOLUTION BILL WERE A REVELATION TO MANY SCOTS, AND SCOTTISH TORIES WERE ENTHUSIASTIC ABOUT THE QUEEN'S CAUTIONARY REMARKS IN HER JUBILEE ADDRESS. FOR THE MOMENT AT LEAST, WITH EVIDENCE OF A NATION-WIDE SWING TO THE CONSERVATIVES, THE SCOTTISH TORIES SHOW NO INCLINATION TO ADOPT A STRONGER POSITION IN FAVOR OF DEVOLUTION THAN THEIR ENGLISH COUNTERPARTS.

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PAGE 03 LONDON 08089 01 OF 02 161932Z

4. CIRCUMSTANCES AND ASTUTE PRE-CONFERENCE PLANNING ASSISTED IN MAKING A SMOOTH TRANSITION. COMPARED WITH LAST YEAR'S STORMY DEBATE ON DEVOLUTION (REFTEL), THIS YEAR'S DEBATE WAS HELD ON THE INITIAL DAY OF DEBATE BEFORE MANY DELEGATES, PARTICULARLY THE YOUNG CONSERVATIVES AND YOUNG PROFESSIONALS ARRIVED; THE GENERAL AUDIENCE WAS PREDOMINANTLY MIDDLEAGED AND OLDER, AN AUDIENCE PREDISPOSED TO ACCEPT THE LEAD OF THE PODIUM WITHOUT DISSENSION. FURTHERMORE, THE AUDIENCE WAS COMPOSED LARGELY OF PARTY ACTIVISTS WHO WERE BOTH ENTHUSIASTIC ABOUT AND WEARIED FROM THEIR EXERTIONS IN LOCAL AND DISTRICT ELECTIONS; WITH FEW EXCEPTIONS, THEY WERE NOT ANXIOUS TO HAVE A FULL-SCALE DEBATE ON AN EMOTIVE ISSUE LIKE DEVOLUTION.

5. THE PODIUM SPEAKER THIS YEAR WAS SHADOW SPOKESMAN ON DEVOLUTION FRANCIS PYM, WHOSE ACCENT AND DEMEANOR LEFT LITTLE DOUBT OF THE BRITISHNESS OF THE TORY PARTY. PYM

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PAGE 01 LONDON 08089 02 OF 02 161935Z
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LIMITED OFFICIAL USE SECTION 02 OF 02 LONDON 08089

HAD LAID THE GROUNDWORK WELL FOR A SLIGHT SHIFT IN EMPHASIS; SINCE RELIEVING WILLIE WHITELAW OF THE DEVOLUTION PORTFOLIO A FEW MONTHS AGO, HE HAS MADE AT LEAST SEVEN TRIPS TO SCOTLAND TO TALK WITH TORIES. THIS YEAR AGAIN, MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT WERE NOT INVITED TO SPEAK DURING THE DEBATE, ELIMINATING THE POSSIBILITY OF A PRO-DEVOLUTION LOBBY'S DEVELOPING UNDER BUCHANAN-SMITH OR RIVKIN. AT THE SAME TIME, SUITABLE BOWS WERE MADE TO THE SERVICES OF BUCHANAN-SMITH AND CO. TO SOOTHE ANY RUFFLED FEELINGS.

6. THE BRUNT OF PYM'S MESSAGE WAS SIMPLY TO SLOW DOWN AND NOT JUMP INTO DEVOLUTION. HE STRESSED THE NEED FOR INTER-PARTY TALKS TO FIND AREAS OF AGREEMENT ON WHICH A GENUINE DEVOLUTION BILL COULD BE DRAFTED AND SUGGESTED THAT CONSTITUTIONAL CHANGES SHOULD BE CAREFULLY CONSIDERED. HE OMITTED ANY REFERENCE TO AN "ELECTED ASSEMBLY," A PART OF THE TORIES' PREVIOUS COMMITMENT.

7. MRS. THATCHER REFERRED TO DEVOLUTION IN HER SPEECH, BUT RESTRICTED HER REMARKS TO ENDORSEMENT OF PYM'S
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PAGE 02 LONDON 08089 02 OF 02 161935Z

COMMENTS. OTHER ELEMENTS OF HER SPEECH, WHICH WAS WARMLY RECEIVED BY THE CONFERENCE, WILL BE DEALT WITH SEPARATELY.

8. A FINAL INDICATION OF THE DIRECTION IN WHICH THE SCOTTISH TORIES ARE MOVING WAS THE REPORT PRESENTED BY PARTY CHAIRMAN MP RUSSELL FAIRGRIEVE. STRESSING ECONOMIC DIFFICULTIES AS A RATIONALE, FAIRGRIEVE REVEALED THAT THE TORY OFFICE IN EDINBURGH WILL IN THE FUTURE BE MORE CLOSELY LINKED WITH CENTRAL OFFICE IN LONDON, PARTICULARLY WITH THE CONSERVATIVE RESEARCH DEPARTMENT. WHILE THE INCREASED DEPENDENCE ON LONDON HEADQUARTERS DOES NOT HERALD THE IMMEDIATE DISAPPEARANCE OF A SEPARATE SCOTTISH TORY PARTY, THE REPORT WAS CONSIDERED SENSITIVE ENOUGH TO BE HANDLED AT A SESSION CLOSED TO THE MEDIA AND TO FOREIGN OBSERVERS.

9. COMMENT: THE PERTH CONFERENCE WAS AN IDEAL OPPORTUNITY FOR THE CONSERVATIVES TO PUT FORWARD THE DRIFT OF PARTY POLICY ON DEVOLUTION WHICH HAS BEEN WIDELY ASSUMED TO DATE AND TO HAVE IT ENDORSED BY THE SCOTTISH TORIES. IN THE WORDS OF ONE DELEGATE, THE PARTY IS SWEEPING DEVOLUTION UNDER THE CARPET. A SCOTTISH MP OPPOSED TO ALMOST ANY FORM OF DEVOLUTION (IAN SPROAT) TOLD THE REPORTING OFFICER AFTER THE DEBATE THAT AN ELECTED ASSEMBLY WAS A "DEAD" POLICY AS FAR AS THE CONSERVATIVES ARE CONCERNED AND THAT THE PROSPECTS FOR ANY MEANINGFUL FORM OF DEVOLUTION ARE CONSIDERABLY THREATENED.

10. ANOTHER MP, HOWEVER, SEES CONSIDERABLE PERIL FOR THE CONSERVATIVES IN CLOSING THE DOOR COMPLETELY ON DEVOLUTION. HE STRESSED THAT THE CONSERVATIVES, AFTER A GENERAL ELECTION, WOULD BE IN THE SAME DIFFICULTY AS THE PRESENT LABOR GOVERNMENT IN TRYING TO DRAFT DEVOLUTION LEGISLATION. PYM TOLD THE REPORTING OFFICER THE CONSERVATIVE POSITION IS LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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PAGE 03 LONDON 08089 02 OF 02 161935Z

VATIVES WOULD HAVE TO FACE A VERY UNCOOPERATIVE LABOR OPPOSITION AND THAT DEVOLUTION LEGISLATION WOULD BE DIFFICULT; PYM SUGGESTED IT MIGHT BEST BE HANDLED THROUGH OVER-ALL CONSTITUTIONAL REFORMS PERHAPS INVOLVING THE HOUSES OF COMMONS AND LORDS AS WELL. BUT PYM DID NOT, REPEAT NOT, PUT DEVOLUTION HIGH ON THE PRIORITY LIST OF MEASURES A NEW CONSERVATIVE GOVERNMENT MIGHT SEEK TO IMPLEMENT.

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